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# PATHWAY TO THE BACCALAUREATE:

How one community college is helping  
underprepared students succeed

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EDUCATION POLICY PROGRAM

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America is losing its lead in higher education. While other countries are turning out ever-increasing numbers of college graduates, the U.S. has stalled, leaving it behind at least 10 other developed nations in educational attainment.<sup>1</sup> Not everyone needs a college degree, but it's becoming increasingly clear that as a nation we need to produce more college graduates to meet the changing demands of our economy and remain globally competitive.

For low-income students and first-generation college goers, the local community college is often the most practical point of entry into higher education. Community colleges are by far the fastest growing sector in American public education—from the early 1960s to the mid-2000s, community college enrollment grew by more than 700 percent (enrollment in public four-year colleges increased by about 200 percent during the same time frame).<sup>2</sup> Community colleges enrolled 6.2 million students in 2006, or about 35 percent of all postsecondary students.<sup>3</sup>

Many of these new community college students arrive with the kind of life circumstances that make it hard to succeed in school, like limited financial resources, demanding family obligations, or difficulty finding transportation or child care. Many students come to community college from crowded or dysfunctional K-12 school systems that haven't adequately prepared them for the demands of college. As a result, an estimated 60 percent of entering community college students need some kind of remedial coursework before they can qualify for regular college-level classes that count toward a degree.<sup>4</sup>

Making matters worse, virtually all community colleges operate in state policy environments that do little to encourage or reward success. On average, per student funding at community colleges is less than half of that at four-year research universities.<sup>5</sup> There are limited quality controls: community colleges are neither rewarded for success nor penalized for failure. Few studies exist about community colleges and their effectiveness. Even basic information on student outcomes and “what works” is hard to come by. Given the layers of policy and funding problems and the enormity of students' educational challenges, the community college's task can appear impossible.

Now, after years of neglect, community colleges suddenly have the nation's attention. Recession-impacted students are flooding admissions offices, while policymakers and business leaders are looking to community colleges to help America's workers gain new skills and get back to work.

President Obama has called for community colleges to graduate an additional five million students by 2020. The focus on community colleges makes good sense: without significant attention to these institutions, the president's national college graduation goals will amount to little. But given current success rates at community colleges, particularly for remedial students, it's certain to be an uphill battle.

### **One Promising Approach: Pathway to the Baccalaureate**

Underprepared students present colleges with a complex set of problems, and figuring out how to help them is neither obvious nor easy. Community colleges across the country are trying any number of new programs and strategies, but most are just at the beginning stages of understanding what works and why. Northern Virginia Community College—commonly known as NOVA—is deeply examining these questions. Five years ago, NOVA launched the Pathway to the Baccalaureate (Pathway) program to provide underprepared students with a structured system of support from high school to community college to a four-year university.

The program's methods are strong but not necessarily groundbreaking, and there's no single component that makes NOVA successful—instead it's a package of practical ideas that are executed as part of a coherent, clearly envisioned system. Here's how it works:

- The program, based on NOVA’s campuses, sends eight transition counselors to area high schools to recruit participants. Recruits are usually capable and motivated students coming from families that have little or no sense of what it takes to navigate the college access maze—and a great deal of uncertainty about paying for college. Those accepted into the program—and 80 percent are—must express a desire to graduate not just from NOVA, but also from a four-year college.
- Once in the program, high school students get to know their Pathway counselor through one-on-one meetings, pizza parties, trips to NOVA and George Mason University (GMU) campuses, and workshops. These activities are scheduled during the school day to accommodate students who are unavailable after school or in the evenings. The Pathway counselors help students navigate the entire process of enrolling at NOVA—everything from handling financial aid to taking placement tests.
- After students enroll at NOVA, a team of five retention counselors picks up where the transition counselors leave off, advising students as needed on academic and personal challenges that could get in the way of staying in school and succeeding. Students receive seamless counseling that ensures they know when to register for classes, apply for financial aid, or do just about anything to keep them on track. Pathway’s tracking system also alerts Pathway counselors at mid-semester if students are earning below-C averages.
- Pathway students also immediately enroll in a College Success Skills class, which teaches college-necessary study habits that, for various reasons, these students often have missed. Sometimes it’s as simple as how to take notes, filter out friends who may be skipping class, and turn down an extra shift at work the night before an exam. In addition, specially designed “fast-track remediation” classes in math and English (such as the English 95 boot camp described on page 6) attempt to steer some students clear of traditional remedial classes, where they can get bogged down unnecessarily.
- Finally, Pathway students begin transitioning to the four-year college of their choice while still taking classes at NOVA. Many Pathway students enroll at partner institution GMU, where NOVA Pathway students with a 2.5

grade point average are guaranteed admission through an articulation agreement. (NOVA students not in the Pathway program must have a 2.75 grade point average.) Pathway students have also attended Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Mary Washington, and others.

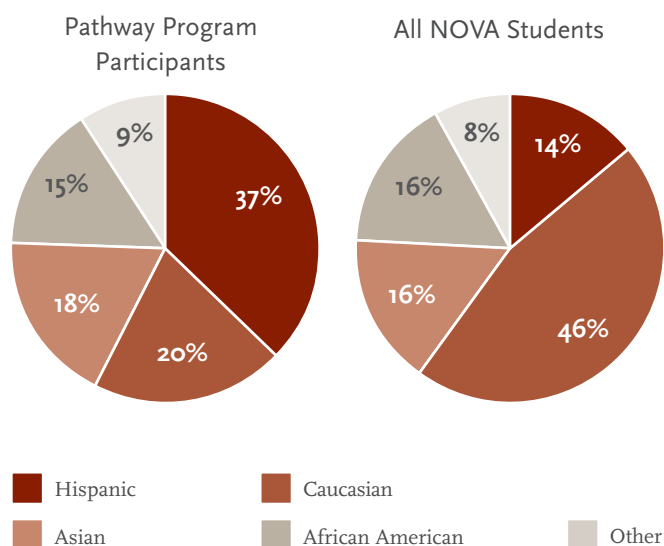
None of Pathway’s program components is especially novel or expensive. The difference is that Pathway is centered on the student and designed to meet a range of needs—academic, financial, or personal—through one coherent program. It’s a commonsense approach that was designed by someone who understands what it’s like to struggle in an unfamiliar college environment. Program director and co-creator Kerin Hilker-Balkissoon grew up in an apartment complex not far from NOVA’s Alexandria, Va. campus. When she left the area several years ago to attend the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, she nearly flunked out the first semester. “I had such a difficult time adjusting from high school to college. A lot of what I structured for Pathway is based on my own personal experience of being on my own and trying to learn the ins and outs of college, how to study, the secrets of success. Pathway is what I wish I had known, what I wish someone had walked me through.”

## A Wide Range of Students and Challenges

Those familiar with the high-income Northern Virginia suburbs outside Washington, D.C.—and their well-reputed K-12 school system—might assume that few NOVA students would need remediation. In fact, NOVA’s educational challenges are typical for an American community college. About 47 percent of NOVA’s first-time students are enrolled in a remedial class. NOVA’s students are also more ethnically diverse than one might expect: about half are African American, Hispanic, or Asian (compared to roughly 40 percent in the surrounding Northern Virginia area).<sup>6</sup>

Many NOVA students struggle financially. In the Pathway program, close to half of the students come from families earning less than \$35,000 a year. And limited financial resources can lead to a host of other challenges that get in the way of college success: too much work, trouble getting to school, competing family responsibilities, and many others.

## Student Demographics, 2008–09



Source: Northern Virginia Community College

Take Pathway student Zara Amrami, 18, who was born in Casablanca, Morocco, and came to the U.S. eight years ago. Her parents are divorced and her father lives in France. She lives here with her mother and older brother. Not only is she paying \$1,600 a semester to attend NOVA, but she is also trying to save money for the far more expensive four-year school that will follow. She aspires to be a radiologist. That means balancing a full-time student workload with her full-time job selling mattresses and vacuums at Sears.

During the week Amrami works from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m.; on weekends she works from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. “It’s pretty stressful. I try to find time for studying. I take my books with me and during break time look over things. When do I sleep? My schoolwork comes first. After I come home I do homework and go over class work. Then I go to bed.”

Another Pathway student, Esmeralda Morales, 19, came to the U.S. four years ago from Guatemala with her mother and siblings. She has worked since she arrived here as a ninth grader, first at a dry cleaner’s and then as a cashier at Wendy’s. Currently she’s working as a receptionist in a medical office. Her income and driving skills are essential to the family, which creates a powerful time management challenge.

“I’m the first in my family to get a license. I drive my entire family everywhere. I have to drive my sister to work and pick her up. I drive my mother and I drive my brother to school.” Morales estimates that she drives three hours a day, on top of working between 20 and 30 hours a week. “This is one reason I’m a part-time student. If this wasn’t happening I would be able to take more classes.”

With hectic schedules and commutes, students are often isolated on community college campuses. “Their world is family and work,” explains Assistant Professor Patricia Deavers. Many have only limited opportunities to form relationships with faculty or other students and lack the support and camaraderie those relationships could offer. Making matters more difficult, many of these students are the first in their families to attend college and have few adults to turn to for guidance and information.

NOVA President Dr. Robert Templin talks frankly about these students’ challenges and the school’s responsibility to address them. He says, “You can’t sit on the mountain-top and point down and say ‘they’ are the problem. ... If we’re going to be competitive globally we need a greater percentage of people going to college. It just so happens the majority of the people coming down the pipeline don’t have a college-going tradition.”

Templin first started thinking about that demographic shift while working in Northern Virginia’s prosperous high-tech industry. “I saw that not everyone was joining the prosperity and I saw that the fastest growing part of the population wasn’t getting the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the economy. That’s a very dangerous dynamic, because we won’t have the people we need to sustain the economic growth we created.” He fears that communities that don’t take the initiative to improve educational outcomes will suffer what those in Southern California have suffered. “They created a knowledge-based economy, but their schools, colleges, and universities were not able to keep the population educated at the level of the economy.”

The community college’s role is vital, he says, not only to the region’s economy but also its social well-being. “With such large numbers of people on the periphery of our economy, unless we made stakeholders of them they would become consumers of our social services and not contributors to the economy.”



That sense of responsibility drives the design and culture of the Pathway program, where helping students overcome money-related obstacles is just a regular part of doing business. There's the story of Jamaal West, for example, who juggles classes with lengthy bus commutes and a job at Home Depot. He received a computer notification from NOVA that he had to withdraw from his American history class. The problem? His grants came up \$16 short. But West didn't have \$16, and he had no way to get it. But with assistance from Pathway counselor Jayna Cobbs, whom he checks with several times daily, he applied for a federal loan for the money. And when the \$16 loan was approved, he reentered the American history class.

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—NOVA President Dr. Robert Templin

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Another student, Leticia Zelaya, was drowning in too much work and too many courses, trying to make ends meet but not succeeding. "The first semester here I was working two jobs and I was a full-time student. I was working at Bubbles as a hair stylist and also at a computer software company doing customer service. I was working 40 hours a week, paying my own way. I thought I could do it but halfway through the first semester I realized I couldn't. ... By the end of the first semester I was failing two classes—math and history." Fortunately, Zelaya's Pathway counselor convinced her that she was working too much and helped her qualify for \$600 in federal aid. That grant, combined with a Pathway scholarship, allowed her to cut back to working just one job, the computer software position, at about 20 hours a week.

## System Misalignment

When the committee planning the Pathway program first met in early 2005, they assumed that the bulk of their task would be helping students navigate the college bureaucracy and address the various economic obstacles they faced. Indeed, this is a big part of what the Pathway program does, but it's not the whole story.

The program hit a speed bump early when NOVA evaluators sampled prospective high school seniors and learned most were not ready for college academics. "Over half weren't ready; that was a shock to me. We know we have great high schools in Northern Virginia: How is it that their graduates were not ready to come into college-level work?" asked Templin.

In time, the college and K-12 administrators realized that the gap between how NOVA measures college-ready skills and how high schools measure their students—whether they pass Virginia's Standards of Learning state assessments—is both wide and daunting. "It was at our meetings with the school districts that we realized we were not communicating to schools what our expectations were," says Templin. "We discovered they were teaching to standardized outcomes on state assessments that weren't related to college readiness. We all looked at one another and concluded, 'No wonder there's a problem.' "

The next revelation arose at a meeting where the college and K-12 administrators were puzzling over the large number of students requiring remedial English classes in college despite having passed high school English. Many of those students, it turned out, never transitioned from English as a Second Language classes to mainstream English classes in high school. "You could hear a moan go out over the room...everyone on the NOVA side realized the [high school] graduation requirement in English was not sufficient for students to enter college. ... It was literally a discovery as to why such large numbers of students passing English 12 were not college ready when we thought they were," said Templin.

## A closer look at NOVA's "boot camp"

*Welcome to English 95, better known as boot camp, home to 15 students who on this August day at Northern Virginia Community College have a lot riding on the next four weeks: Will they survive Professor Patricia Deavers's course and transition to a for-credit English class when the fall semester begins?*

*If they pass this newly designed boot camp (renamed "fast-track remediation" as of 2010), it means they won't waste time or tuition money on a remedial English class that won't count toward a college degree. Passing the class also means they will be far less likely to become yet another community college dropout statistic. The class is just one component of the broader Pathway to the Baccalaureate program.*

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It's Week 1, grammar day in English 95, and Professor Patricia Deavers is deep into a lesson on fixing comma splices and avoiding run-on sentences—not to mention the perils of starting sentences with 'because.'

Sandra (last name withheld) guesses wrong on a question about commas, then yawns and stretches. A week earlier she was ecstatic when she learned her financial aid had come through. Without that modest grant, she would have dropped out immediately. In the boot camp class, however, Sandra seems unsteady.

Sandra comes from a Latino family that needs her for household duties, especially driving. She is a "Generation 1.5" student: someone who is bilingual but whose formal schooling has been almost entirely in English. Although Generation 1.5 students appear competent speaking English, they often exhibit poor writing skills, especially involving basic grammar.

Cheri Bridgeforth, who teaches English as a Second Language courses at NOVA and was involved in the design of Pathway, sees these students daily in other classes. "Generation 1.5 students excel at speaking and listening. They have American friends and they are part of

the culture. The breakdown comes in writing, with grammar that is not appropriate for academic writing. Perhaps there's an article—a, an, the—missing. Or there might be subject-verb agreement issues."

Says Deavers: "Bless their hearts, they are catching on, but they lack the basics, so they know how to string together some phrases but they really don't understand the meaning of what they are saying. It's something in their head, they've memorized it and it sounds like something you would write in college, but if you ask what it means they can't tell you. They have never found their own voice as writers. They don't know standard English so they are struggling with word choice and syntax."

Sandra's problems, however, run deeper than comma errors. Already, she has missed one class. Not a good sign, cautions Deavers, who knows all the signs, because it was an all-important class trip to the library. It's possible to make up the assignment, but very difficult.

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Week 2 reveals one casualty—Sandra, who alarmingly missed a second class, this time to drive her mother to settle a legal issue. It's over. Sandra drops out of boot camp and enters the regular remedial English class, which is more expensive and will take a full semester to complete (instead of four weeks). The move will also set back Sandra's progress in the English sequence by one semester, making it that much harder to reach her ultimate goal of graduating.

Now the boot camp has 14 students.

The class is assigned a writing exercise: Pretend a reporter is interviewing you 20 years from now: What's your success story? Several students' essays include a revealing section on "obstacles faced":

Luis Latorre (aspiring engineer): *Ever since he was young, people would always tell him that "you will never make it as an engineer." Latorre did not have a friend that supported him to keep his mind on school; instead most of them were dropouts.*



Charlotte Eversburg (aspiring small-business owner): *Most of the obstacles she faced were in college. She had a big problem with procrastination, and having a negative attitude because she didn't think she could make it. Another issue she faced was in the workforce. Being a woman trying to open up her own business was difficult. She had to put in a lot more time and effort to be taken seriously.*

Jeffrey Assibey (aspiring economist): *Even though he received some money for tuition from his parents, he still had to work to be able to cover the rest of his tuition and books. His part-time job was a major distraction that affected his grades tremendously. With his grades sinking, he quit his job to focus on studies. With the help of his longtime mentor Mr. Goldstein [an economics professor at George Mason, who mentored him in high school], Jeffrey was able to manage his time and resources to fit his busy schedule.*

In the end, every student except Sandra made the leap into the first level of for-credit English, known at NOVA as English III, English Composition, where the Pathway students mix in with others. Asked for an update, Deavers reported that the boot camp graduates were working diligently and doing well in their new class.

“I’m excited about the way they take on the challenges of each new assignment. Right now there are several As, more Bs, and a few Cs. The students earning Cs are extremely concerned about what they need to do to improve. They are realizing the difference between pass/fail and actually earning a letter grade that goes on their transcript. Until they see the grades on their papers, sometimes students don’t believe me when I tell them that if they don’t work on a certain weakness in their writing, the best they will earn is a C. I have great confidence that at least two or three of these students won’t settle for average.”

Armed with this enlightening information, NOVA launched the Pathway program. The first year, the college expected 100 applications for Pathway and got 330. Each year has mirrored the first, with demand far surpassing expectations. The program started with 14 high schools in 2005 and by 2009 was working with 31. In the current 2009-10 school year, Pathway serves 3,700 students—from high school seniors all the way up to the program’s oldest students, those about to earn four-year degrees.

## A Look at the Numbers

	2009-10
NOVA campuses	6
NOVA total student enrollment	72,500
Pathway program, total enrollment	3,700
Applicants to Pathway program	2,105*
Applicants accepted to Pathway program	1,675*
Pathway program staff members	16
Partner school districts	4
Partner high schools	31

Source: Northern Virginia Community College  
 \*Approximate (still pending at time of publication).

## Cross-Cutting Partnership

When Templin first proposed the Pathway program in 2002, his early overtures to the surrounding public school systems were met with some skepticism and suspicion that perhaps NOVA was trying to burnish its reputation. A fresh opening arrived in 2004 when a new superintendent, Jack Dale, took over Fairfax County Public Schools. “I met with him within the first few weeks he had arrived. We didn’t have a name for the program or anything, but we began the process of defining its major characteristics, which were about granting admission to NOVA while a student was still in 12th grade and then guaranteeing admission to George Mason University.”

In describing the creation of Pathway, Templin repeatedly points to collaboration as the key to success. “Early on, it became clear that NOVA could not be successful acting alone, whether in providing college access to underserved populations or in achieving student success among our at-risk students. We would have to go beyond the conventional notions of ‘partnerships’ with our high schools and our neighboring university. Beyond articulation and more than dual enrollment agreements, our efforts needed to be systemic and integrated, able to reach significant scale, have high impact, and be capable of being sustainable.”

The multi-institution partnership was built to be financially sustainable over the long haul. “We systematically created an integrated program model and a business model where efforts were jointly funded and operated by the school systems and the college as line items in our respective budgets, not as grant-funded activities dependent upon ‘soft money,’ ” said Templin. The partners committed existing funds to the project and, seeing its value over the years, have continued to make those investments ever since.

The program’s current budget, including operational expenses and staffing, is \$856,856. The K-12 school systems pay another \$385,000 for their counselors.<sup>7</sup> George Mason University contributes funding in the form of admissions support, student events, and increased institutional access (without corresponding fees) for Pathway students.

## Promising Outcomes

NOVA’s efforts with the Pathway program appear to be paying off. In the fall of 2009, data expert George Gabriel, Vice President of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment at NOVA, crunched the latest outcome data for Pathway students, comparing them to similar students at NOVA under the age of 22. Given that Pathway students tend to be poorer, are more likely to be immigrants or children of immigrants, and are more likely to have disabilities (30 percent of Pathway students have disabilities, compared to 10 percent in the college’s general student population), one would expect the comparison sample from outside the Pathway program to show higher retention rates and better grades. Instead, Pathway students are outperforming their peers on measures of retention, grade point average, and graduation rate.

Those numbers look good to NOVA. “I see that we are having a positive impact on retention,” said Hilker-Balkissoon, who was especially pleased with the higher grade point averages. “We look for students who can be academically successful but have major mountains to climb over to achieve their success. And we’re getting more of those students through.”

To date, the number of Pathway students who have graduated from George Mason University (GMU) is modest, about 100, with another 100 graduating from other four-year institutions. Over the coming years, however, those

## Outcome Data on Pathway Program Students

	Pathway Cohort 1: 2006-07	Comparison Group*	Pathway Cohort 2: 2007-08	Comparison Group*
Semester Retention	88.5%	81.6%	84.6%	80.4%
Annual Retention	74.0%	66.6%	75.4%	65.4%
G.P.A. Greater than 2.0	72.9%	62.5%	69.1%	61.6%
Graduation by Year 3	17.2%	12.1%	N/A	N/A

Source: Northern Virginia Community College, Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment.

\*Comparison groups are first-time students at NOVA who are under age 22 and enrolled full-time in the corresponding semesters, and who do not participate in Pathway. Information on group sizes and statistical significance can be found at the end of this document.

numbers will grow into the several hundreds. Meanwhile, the program's impact is significant for students who have made it all the way to the university.

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### Pathway students are outperforming their peers on measures of retention, grade point average, and graduation rate.

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Carol Zambrana Arias, 20, is one of those students now at GMU. Arias arrived in the U.S. from Bolivia to join other family members as a high school senior. Academically, that was not a problem—she had attended an American school in Bolivia and she did well in her Northern Virginia high school. But legally, the transition was more challenging—in the process of applying for naturalization, she was told to forget about college.

“I had a lot of people tell me: ‘You can’t go to college.’ Even when I talked to the [high school counselors] they said it was going to be difficult.” The hurdle was out-of-state tuition, which she would have to pay no matter where she enrolled and which she could not afford.

The Pathway counselor, however, gave her hope by informing her that if an employer helped pay her tuition, she could qualify for a lower tuition rate. Through this route, Arias paid for school, graduated from NOVA with a 3.8 grade point average, and immediately enrolled at GMU, where she is double majoring in marketing and accounting.

Currently a junior at GMU, Arias said her residency paperwork came through in the late summer of 2009. “If it wasn’t for Pathway my college studies would have been delayed by two or three years.”

Tara Mueting, also a student at GMU, is another early beneficiary of Pathway. The daughter of a single mother in the Army, Mueting grew up on a succession of military bases, not moving to Virginia until her 16th birthday when her mother retired from the service.

“Although I wasn’t supposed to graduate until 2008, I took an extra class in night school so that I would graduate a year early. I was happy to finish high school a year

sooner than expected, but I also hadn’t even given college a thought. As I was finishing up the school year, I heard that there was a counselor from [NOVA] who was scheduled to come to our school every week. I decided to go talk to her, and I’m so happy that I did.”

Mueting credits Pathway with a smooth transition between high school and the community college. “The Pathway program was able to provide answers to all of my mom’s and my questions, and once classes began they made sure that I was doing okay. They also require that we check in with them before registering for the next semester. It’s great to have counselors that are there specifically for you, in a college where there were originally only a few counselors there for everyone.”

Pathway also provided support when it was time to transfer to GMU. “Pathway helped me through the application process, waived the application fee, and ensured that I was set for graduation. They even had a ceremony specifically for graduating Pathway students. Overall, Pathway made my first two years of college a great experience, as well as making my transfer process an easy one.” Now Mueting is in her first semester at GMU, working on bachelor’s degrees in global affairs and art history, as well as a minor in Spanish.

### Challenges Ahead

Despite its successes with the Pathway program, NOVA’s efforts to date have not been perfect. For instance, newly formed “learning communities” aimed at boosting achievement in remedial math have yet to demonstrate success (see text box, page 10). A considerable amount of energy has gone into the program, which targets students in Math 3, a remedial course (the equivalent of high school algebra 1) that is the most failed course at NOVA. To date, any progress made by the program can only be described as slim.

NOVA’s next frontier will be working with its surrounding partners in K-12 school systems to reduce remedial needs in the first place. “For NOVA to serve as a gateway to the dream,” says Templin, “we had to have a large-scale, systematic, focused effort on this issue.” Alongside Pathway to the Baccalaureate, Templin and his partners want to see a companion push to make more high school graduates college ready. “Why shouldn’t we be trying to prevent remediation rather than trying to fix it?” he asks. “Fairfax County schools came to the conclusion with enthusiasm.”

Promoting college readiness will rely on changes at the high school level that have yet to take place. But Templin believes he and the school districts are close to a breakthrough. “What we want to do is give students their assessments in 11th grade rather than 12th grade, so they can alter their senior year.” The reform should go beyond retaking courses, says Templin, to a focus on the exact skills these students are missing. Just as NOVA’s English 95 boot camp class focuses on common grammar and writing deficits, the senior-year classes should target specific math and English skills.

Any improvements or expansions, however, will likely have to be done with no extra money, and maybe even less than the program currently receives. So far, the program has retained full funding from all sources through 2009-10. However, with a particularly difficult budget cycle coming in 2010-11, program leaders are bracing for possible cuts. According to Hilker-Balkissoon, the timing couldn’t be worse. “This comes as the number of students meeting the

criteria of our target populations is increasing even more rapidly than forecast,” she says, mostly due to the number of blue- and white-collar workers who have been laid off in the last year and to families who have relocated to Washington, D.C. and Northern Virginia in search of employment.

Even now, Pathway counselor caseloads are reaching the breaking point. For example, Monica Gomez had a caseload of 360 high school students last year, and when those students arrive at NOVA they will continue to rely on Gomez for guidance. In effect, that means her caseload will top 600. “I’m pretty good with names but each year it’s getting more difficult.”

“If we have to cut back our services,” says Hilker-Balkissoon, “hundreds of additional students will lose access to Pathway and will likely lose their dream of achieving a college degree. ... The storm clouds are certainly at the horizon. Whether the storm actually hits us this time around remains to be seen.”

### Still looking for a math solution

Pathway to the Baccalaureate is the centerpiece of NOVA’s efforts to assist students who need remediation and extra assistance to succeed in college. The college has other coordinated strategies to help students, such as participating in Achieving the Dream—a national initiative to increase success rates among nontraditional college-goers. As part of Achieving the Dream, NOVA scrubbed its program data to determine the biggest reason students drop out. It didn’t take long to settle on the key barrier: a remedial course called Math 3, which covers skills learned in a typical high school algebra 1 class.

NOVA administrators found that 38 percent of the incoming students who took the math placement test got placed into Math 3. Even more perplexing, only about 40 percent of Math 3 students in any given semester passed the course. (The comparable numbers for English: 34 percent of incoming students taking the English placement test get placed into remedial English, but 64 percent of those students pass the class.) Without Math 3 and its follow-up course, students can’t proceed to the for-credit math class

that’s required to graduate. A large percentage of students who start in Math 3 never graduate from NOVA. “You get into a developmental [remedial] trap and then stay there,” says George Gabriel, vice president of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment at NOVA.

No one at NOVA is certain why so many students arrive with poor math skills and then have trouble breaking out of developmental math. One common contributing factor is the lengthy period of time between when students last took math and when they arrived at NOVA to take the math placement test. Mathematics professor Dave Conroy says, “If you’ve been away from math for one semester, a year, or two years, you’ve got to start over. Students may come here four years after graduating from high school. Of course they can’t do algebra.”

Stephanie Shadid, an aspiring physical therapist, is a good example. She took no math her senior year in high school, and then spent two years after graduation working in a hair salon. Though she got good grades in high school math, she placed into Math 3 at NOVA, which covers content she took in the ninth grade. “I was surprised I tested into it,” she says, but acknowledges, “It’s a good refresher.”

## Promising Practices: What Can Other Colleges Learn from NOVA?

Community colleges vary tremendously in terms of size, student population, and educational focus, making it impossible to find a particular program that works everywhere. However, the Pathway program does offer a set of strong ideas for supporting student success that virtually any college could consider adapting or adopting. These ideas can and should be reflected in federal policy affecting higher education.

### Integrated services centered on the student

At many colleges, students go to one office for academic counseling and another for help with financial aid. If they need help with family-, job-, or immigration-related obstacles, they may have no one to turn to at all. Pathway students, however, can always start with their Pathway counselor, whose aim is to help students address whatever obstacles are in their way.

For most students, one of the biggest obstacles is money—how to come up with \$1,600 per semester in tuition. “We spend hours helping them with financial aid,” says Pathway retention counselor Ellen Fancher-Ruiz, “even though we’re not financial aid officers.” And for most students, says Jayna Cobbs, it’s an ongoing issue: “They might have this semester paid for, but what about next semester?”

After money, Cobbs continues, “their biggest concerns are about commuting—‘How am I going to get to school tomorrow?’ And then juggling work: ‘How am I going to get homework done while working?’ ” What makes the difference to these students is having a Pathway counselor to confide in. Says Cobbs, “They always know there’s someone there to talk to, someone who will return their e-mails.”

Some of the Pathway counselors’ most difficult moments come when advising undocumented students and those with pending immigration status, some of whom have

NOVA’s plan for addressing the problem is a learning communities concept where a math professor teams up with a College Success Skills instructor to teach the same group of students. Students in professor Raymond Jones’s class, for example, learn study skills for 50 minutes, take a short break, and then learn algebra from math professor Karen Walters.

Jones’s class helps with general college study skills, but is geared specifically toward students’ experiences learning mathematics. “I don’t want you to feel that math is something you love or hate,” says Jones in the first part of class. “It’s really about discipline.” Today’s lesson: homework. “When you did homework in high school, the teacher always checked it. College is different,” says Jones. “Here, you do homework not because it is going to be checked but because it is absolutely necessary.”

Today’s guest in Jones’s class is math professor Sumi Chatterjee, who uses an overhead display to illustrate his research into the value of completing homework. Chatterjee randomly chose samples of homework completed in one of his math classes. Then, he graded the homework and tracked the outcomes of the students who had high and low grades on their homework. When the results were tabulated, the data

revealed the power of putting effort into homework: Far more of the students with good homework grades passed the course. “This is real data and I found a strong correlation,” said Chatterjee. Succeeding in college math, he said, is not a matter of “giftedness. ... If you are doing good homework in college, you will do well.”

Given that the learning communities program has only finished its first year, it is too soon to draw any conclusions, said Gabriel. But disappointingly, “the first-year data did not show great improvement in the success rates of community college students. We anticipated a success rate of approximately 54 or 55 percent, but the rate only improved from 44 to 49 percent. However, the retention rate of these participants was very impressive. The fall 2008 to spring 2009 retention rate for the learning communities cohort was 83 percent, whereas the retention rate for the comparison group was 77 percent.”

Based on these early outcomes, NOVA is making adjustments to the way the learning communities program is run, including the use of technology and peer tutors, and is continuing to probe for answers.

sailed through high school barely aware of the challenges they will face in college and the workforce. One major obstacle is having to pay out-of-state tuition—an impossibility for nearly all undocumented students.

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**Pathway’s case management approach to counseling is a functional way to help students like Nogales who have complex problems that require extensive follow-up or that fall outside the domain of traditional service silos on campus.**

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One such story comes from Jhon Nogales, 18, who aspires to be a doctor and biomedical researcher. Nogales came to the U.S. only six years ago from Bolivia and learned English quickly and successfully enough to become valedictorian in high school and graduate with a 4.1 average. Nogales might strike some as a fast-track candidate to an elite university, but his immigration status—awaiting permanent resident status—compromises that dream.

Nogales’s immigration status blocks him from receiving federal aid and nearly derailed his hopes of attending NOVA, where he was initially considered an out-of-state student and subject to dramatically higher tuition. Pathway counselors, however, recognized that Nogales’s approved but pending permanent residency could actually qualify him for in-state tuition rates. They helped him to successfully file an appeal for in-state status with the college, which allows him to take a full load of math and science classes at NOVA.

Pathway’s case management approach to counseling is a functional way to help students like Nogales who have complex problems that require extensive follow-up or that fall outside the domain of traditional service silos on campus.

### **Mandatory counseling and skill-building classes**

At most community colleges, counseling services are found on the margins of campus life. Students may choose to see a counselor, but they might also avoid it—either because they’re intimidated or because they simply don’t realize what value it adds. Also, at many community

colleges, the enrollment process has largely been moved online—streamlining access, but also losing an opportunity to make personal contact with students and provide much-needed guidance. Not all students get the orientation, placement exams, and one-on-one counseling that would help them succeed.

In the Pathway program, counseling services are not offered passively, but pushed directly into students’ schedules. Students are required to have regular check-ins with their counselors. If necessary, they are pulled out of class for counseling appointments because most of the students depart for work the moment classes end — that’s the only way to keep the system running.

Another way that Pathway pushes support directly into students’ schedules is through required College Success Skills courses. Besides teaching study skills, these courses provide a steady stream of conversation about overcoming obstacles and staying in school. Some of the material might seem obvious and overly simplistic, but Pathway faculty argue that it’s this kind of explicit instruction in the basics that will help underprepared students succeed in an unfamiliar collegiate setting.

### **Ongoing counselor-student relationships**

Many students reported that while still in high school, they formed closer relationships with their Pathway counselors than with their assigned high school counselor. It is these relationships that empower students to enroll in and succeed at NOVA.

Part of the equation is the frequency of contact between students and staff. One student said, “In high school I met with my Pathway counselor every Wednesday. She checked to see how I was doing in my classes, making sure I was on the ball. She helped me sign up for classes at NOVA. She was my support system, kept me motivated.”

Pathway counselors also strive to make themselves available all the time and through multiple channels. “With the regular counselor I had to wait in line,” explains one student. “They just had so many students. I could talk to the Pathway counselor without making an appointment.” Another student says, “The Pathway counselors gave you more ways to communicate with them. Ms. Ingram was e-mailing me all the time. Every time I looked at my phone she was emailing to check on me.” In contrast, “I could



barely find my regular counselor. Every time I went there she was in a meeting.”

This frequent contact seems to foster a closer, more personal connection between students and Pathway counselors. “The high school counselor just wants you to graduate from high school and pick a college,” says one NOVA student. “The Pathway counselor will guide you to the right direction. They have you pick a goal and get you started on the process.” Another agrees: “With the regular high school counselor, it’s more like a business. With the Pathway counselor, it’s more of a personal matter.”

Retention counselor Ellen Fancher-Ruiz, who does not visit high schools, sees firsthand the tight relationships students have with the transition counselors like Monica Gomez. “Monica and I joke about this. Students will come in and ask to see Miss Gomez and be told she’s not in. I’ll ask if I can help, but they’ll say no and just walk out the door. They’re attached to her.”

Those close relationships are critical to students’ persistence, says transition counselor Shannon Ingram. “What these students need is a sense of feeling connected, just one person they can talk to who can constantly tell them they can do it, that they can push through this. If they are told even once they can’t do it, that’s what they remember. For every time they are told they can’t do it, you have to tell them ten times they can do it.”

### Active recruitment of “nontraditional” students

Another factor in Pathway’s success is that it starts well before students set foot on the college campus. In high school, many Pathway students were not seen as prospective college students by either their high school counselors or families—most had unspectacular grades and lacked clear post-graduation plans. Interviews with Pathway students at NOVA revealed that in many cases, they thought that regular high school counselors were more focused on those who had better-defined trajectories into college. “I never even met my high school counselor,” confides one NOVA freshman.

Another student described his high school counselor as “condescending” and was irritated by the low expectations he faced. “I had a lot of difficulty with math and almost didn’t graduate. I would go into my counselor’s office and she would ask me if I wanted to graduate. I found that

### Looking for a few good counselors

The creators of the NOVA Pathway program have carefully designed the way counseling is provided, and they are equally careful about whom they choose to do the work. Pathway counselors are special people: any of them can stand before an auditorium full of parents or a class of skeptical students and make an impression. Just as notable, they always seem to know the name of every student and are able to find time to meet with students, despite having caseloads as large as 360 students.

Program director Kerin Hilker-Balkissoon says she has kept positions open as long as six or seven months waiting for the right candidate. “Recruiting and retaining the best counselors is critical, and it is a key factor in the success of the program,” she says. “When we search for Pathway candidates, I look for three key factors: high energy, approachability, and competency in counseling—especially in multicultural counseling and agency collaboration. I also look for counselors who are team-focused and who are dedicated to serving underrepresented students.”

In general, she says, it is more difficult to recruit for community college positions because they are 12-month positions but their pay is similar to the 10-month K–12 school counseling jobs. To find qualified candidates, the program staff members are encouraged to reach into their own networks, and job notices are posted in local graduate schools or elsewhere in the local community.

Hilker-Balkissoon says that retention has not been much of a challenge so far—in four years, only three of 16 positions with the program have turned over, with two of those being part-time positions. Staff members are heavily involved in planning the program, often recommending and implementing modifications to the program’s design. “Because we all have a sense of responsibility, ownership, and respect for one another, we’re all committed to the success of the program.”

offending. I wouldn't be in high school during my senior year if I didn't want to graduate." The Pathway counselor was different: "She didn't look down on me. She gave me some motivation even if I wasn't doing well."

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**"Our students are first-generation college-goers, low income [individuals] who often don't have a lot of support from home. Many of these students have thought about going to college, but even in their senior year of high school it seems far-fetched."**

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NOVA officials are more sympathetic to high school counselors' heavy workloads and take issue with how some students characterize the guidance they received. "The counselors in the public schools are the ones who nominate the students for Pathway," said NOVA Provost Barbara Saperstone. "If they were as 'un-noticing' as the students seem to say, they would not be able to nominate the students." Hilker-Balkissoon agrees, pointing to the Pathway survey given to high school counselors. "They indicated that with their huge caseloads, they are often put in the position of prioritizing students, and they realize that students in the 'middle' are often left without as much support. The counselors overwhelmingly indicated that having Pathway at their schools allows them to reallocate their time to needier students because they know that students in Pathway will have the transition support that they need."

Many Pathway counselors show "nontraditional" students their own potential. Transition counselor Jayna Cobbs says, "Our students are first-generation college-goers, low income [individuals] who often don't have a lot of support from home. We're a source of both guidance and motivation. Many of these students have thought about going to college, but even in their senior year of high school it seems far-fetched."

As one student explained, "I had been planning on taking a year off to work, to help get my life organized. But the Pathway counselor came to my high school and showed how this [going to college] could actually work for me."

Another explained how the program helped her set a higher goal for herself: "I had been thinking about getting a two-year degree, but my counselor said my future would be a lot brighter if I had a four-year degree. She showed me it would give me a lot more options and that going for a four-year degree is not as hard as I thought. Now I'm thinking about graduate school."

Some Pathway counselors help students identify a specific field of interest or career goal. Retention counselor Fancher-Ruiz says nontraditional students frequently enter community college without clear long-term goals—a major impediment to their success. When she hears students saying "I don't know what I want to do" or "I'm in college because my parents want me to be in college," she reads it as a warning sign for weak motivation and tries to intervene. One student explains how it worked: "Before I signed up for Pathway I didn't know what career goals I had or what college or university would be good for me. The counselor just gave me ideas about what I might like to do. Now, I want to study psychology."

## Conclusion

America's community colleges are finding themselves in a difficult position. After years of neglect from policymakers and the media, they are now under greater scrutiny than ever, tasked with boosting our national college graduation rate and helping to turn around our economy. At the same time, they continue to be flooded with students who are not academically or socially prepared to succeed in college. Given these circumstances, we can't expect community colleges to work miracles. But what *can* we reasonably expect? NOVA's Pathway program suggests a few answers.

First, we can expect community colleges to take responsibility for student success. The challenge of educating underprepared college students can be so overwhelming that even well-meaning educators can fall into the trap of focusing more on students' deficiencies and on who's to blame than on what can be done right away, at the college to help students succeed. At schools like NOVA, administrators have decided to stop pointing fingers and focus on their own sphere of influence. They believe in their own efficacy and want to be recognized when their students show good results. Likewise, they are willing to be held accountable for what happens to their students. NOVA President Dr. Robert Templin says that it's time for colleges to be judged on the success rates of students. "Community col-

leges need to move beyond the issue of enrollment as an indication of success. That system is broken. We have to commit ourselves to increasing the number of graduates.”

We can also expect community colleges to collaborate in meaningful ways with other education sectors. Many community colleges play an isolated, “in between” role, receiving students from high school, providing stand-alone training, then passing students off to a four-year college. But NOVA helps manage the entire pathway through higher education, partnering with feeder high schools to help smooth the transition into college and with a four-year university to ensure that students succeed after they leave. At present, there are few policies or financial incentives supporting such partnerships. But even in the absence of that, the Pathway program shows that meaningful collaboration is possible.

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In an otherwise bleak landscape, colleges like NOVA offer some hopeful examples of how individual colleges can make the most of what they have—not by relying on new funding sources or waiting for policy changes, but by using existing resources shrewdly, aligning practices to goals, and continually improving.

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Finally, we can expect community colleges to scrutinize their own data and strive to improve continually. One thing that sets NOVA apart from its peers is its sustained rigorous effort to collect and analyze data on student success. When school and program leaders investigate how well they are doing, they don’t always like what they see, but it’s important that they are willing to ask hard questions and rethink their programming when it’s clear that something isn’t working.

Ultimately, producing more community college graduates will have little to do with what happens in Washington. To reach our national graduation goals, the unfortunate truth is that community colleges will need to start showing better results with about the same amount of money per student—or even less. The success of the initiative will come down to what individual

campuses are doing on the ground, with the resources they have on hand already.

In an otherwise bleak landscape, colleges like NOVA offer some hopeful examples of how individual colleges can make the most of what they have—not by relying on new funding sources or waiting for policy changes, but by using existing resources shrewdly, aligning practices to goals, and continually improving. It’s the kind of steady, thoughtful work that most any college could do and that many more will need to do if we are to achieve our national targets for college graduation. 📌

## Detail on Pathway Outcome Data

Information about group sizes and statistical information for the table on page 8 is included in the table below.

### Outcome Data on Pathway Program Students

	Pathway Cohort 1: 2006-07	Comparison Group*	Chi-square test for Cohort 1	Pathway Cohort 2: 2007-08	Comparison Group*	Chi-square test for Cohort 2
<b>Semester Retention</b>	88.5% (n = 170)	81.6% (n = 3,232)	p value < 0.05	84.6% (n = 323)	80.4% (n = 3,396)	p value = 0.05
<b>Annual Retention</b>	74.0% (n = 142)	66.6% (n = 2,637)	p value < 0.05	75.4% (n = 288)	65.4% (n = 2,762)	p value < 0.0001
<b>G.P.A. Greater than 2.0</b>	72.9% (n = 140)	62.5% (n = 2,474)	p value < 0.05	69.1% (n = 264)	61.6% (n = 2,600)	p value < 0.01
<b>Graduation by Year 3</b>	17.2% (n = 33)	12.1% (n = 480)	p value < 0.05	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Northern Virginia Community College, Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment.

## About this report

This report is an in-depth case study of the Pathway to the Baccalaureate program at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). The purpose of the case study is to describe in vivid detail the struggles of nontraditional college students and to show one college's innovative ideas for assisting these students. The Pathway to the Baccalaureate program was chosen for its strong leadership, student-centered program design, and demonstrated success with students.

To create detailed descriptions of classes, students, and professors, we made multiple visits to NOVA to observe classes and interview faculty, staff, and students. To learn about Pathway's history, we interviewed the program's creators and college administrators. To learn about students' experiences at the beginning of the program, we visited two partner high schools to talk to students and program staff. To tell the stories of students who have continued on to a four-year university, we interviewed George Mason University students who came through the Pathway program. NOVA's Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment department provided data on student characteristics and outcomes. ■

## Notes

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- 1 Sara Goldrick-Rab, et al., *Transforming America's Community Colleges: A Federal Policy Proposal to Expand Opportunity and Promote Economic Prosperity* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2009). [http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2009/0507\\_community\\_college\\_goldrick\\_rab.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2009/0507_community_college_goldrick_rab.aspx)
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Stephen Provasnik and Michael Planty, *Community Colleges: Special Supplement to The Condition of Education 2008* (NCES 2008-033) (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008). <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2008033>
- 4 See, for example: Thomas Bailey, *Challenge and Opportunity: Rethinking the Role and Function of Developmental Education in Community College* (New York: Working Paper No. 14, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2008). <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=658>
- 5 Patrick Kelly and Dennis Jones, *A New Look at the Institutional Component of Higher Education Finance: A Guide for Evaluating Performance Relative to Financial Resources* (Boulder, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2005). <http://www.higheredinfo.org/analyses/Policy%20Guide%20Jan2007.pdf>
- 6 Northern Virginia Community College Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data, 2009.
- 7 Financial information provided by Pathway program staff member Kerin Hilker-Balkissoon.

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